

THE HOLOCAUST: ITS CONTEMPORARY ETHICAL CHALLENGES

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In this presentation I want to address two dimensions of the ethical challenge that flows from the experience of the Holocaust. The first is the more particular one, the one that stems very directly from the Christian churches' participation in the Holocaust, either by way of collaboration or through rescue efforts. The second concerns some of the general implications of the Holocaust for the modern world. The Holocaust remains a very central experience in recent human history that brought to the surface some of the major issues with which we must deal in the twenty-first century.

Let me begin with the more particular. My own view of the Holocaust is that it grew out of a new ideology that I term bioracism. This new ideology was the direct result of studies in genetics that permeated important university centers in Europe and North America. By bioracism I mean an understanding, supposedly rooted in scientific studies, which maintained that certain groups of people are born biologically inferior. In this perspective there was not much such people could do about their inferiority. It was in their genes. Those propagating such notions saw these inferior groups as threats to human survival and human advancement. If their genes became widespread in society the human race itself would be brought down to a low level. Hence they had to be eliminated or at least contained. While such theories embraced a variety of ethnic and racial groups (e.g., Poles, the disabled, the Roma, gay people), eventually the Jews became identified by far the worst example of such biologically inferior people. They were in Hitlerian terminology described as "vermin." There was absolutely no useful purpose they could serve in humanity's march to greater levels of consciousness and competence. Though the Nazis launched their bioracial plan against the mentally and physically disabled and the Poles, very quickly Jews became the primary targets not merely for biological containment but for outright extermination.¹

This new ideology of bioracism could not have succeeded, however, as well as it did without the seedbed of traditional antisemitism which developed over the centuries in Christian societies. At the grassroots level most people did not understand or care very much about the formal ideology of Nazism. They participated in its plan for the total annihilation of the Jewish community and for the subjugation of other victim groups because Nazism, especially its attitudes towards the Jews, coincided in many *ways* with their religious perspectives.

There has been much discussion about whether religion historically has been a source for good or a source for evil in human society. The picture is very mixed. There is no question that religion at times has been a source of violence and conflict and continues to be that in the twenty-first century. But religion has also been responsible for some good developments in the past and it continues to be a source of compassion and mercy while under girding as well the struggle for justice. There is no better example of this double face of religion than in apartheid South Africa. I really do believe that religion cannot become a strong moral voice for justice until it clears its conscience of any seeds of violence and destruction and that means in part coming to grips with its history. The late Pope John Paul II made an important start in this regard during his papacy but, regrettably, Pope Benedict XVI has seemingly placed a hold on this process, particularly with regard to the Catholic Church's role during the Holocaust.² And yet the Nazi era was certainly one of the moments in human history when religious tradition aided and abetted the implementation of a profoundly destructive ideology.

Most of the people who collaborated with the implementation of Nazi racial plan were in fact baptized Christians. They frequently did so as they continued to participate in Christian worship on a regular basis and regarded themselves as God-fearing believers

in Christ. There were even those in Christianity who under girded such collaboration by developing a positive theology of Nazism. Some were widely known scholars whose writings had a significant impact on international theological education. I think of someone like Gerhard Kittel who served as editor of the very influential *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* which has served as a basic resource for biblical studies for several generations.³ Kittel argued that with the coming of Christ the Old Testament was finished. Judaism had reached the point of exhaustion as a valid religion. The only remaining role for Jews was to live in a condition of perpetual wandering without a homeland of their own. In significant ways the Christian churches seeded Nazism in a direct way. Without such seeding I sincerely doubt Nazi bioracism would have achieved its widespread impact in German society and beyond. While Nazi bioracism was far more than classical Christian antisemitism its seeds would likely have fallen on hard ground without the nourishment provided it by centuries of this antisemitic teaching in the churches.⁴

It is necessary for those of us who profess faith in Christianity today to come to grips with the responsibility that the Christian churches bear for what happened in Nazi Germany., We were not the actual perpetrators, but we must acknowledge clearly and decisively what our Christian brothers and sisters did during this period of great darkness. As I already indicated Pope John Paul II twice accepted such responsibility in the year 2000 during the liturgical ceremony in Rome on the first Sunday of Lent and then again, specifically in terms of the persecution of Jews, in a note he placed in Jerusalem's historic Western Wall during his visit to that city. This went beyond what the Vatican document on the Shoah *We Remember* had said in 1998 where admission of guilt was confined to some "wayward" Christians.⁵ A number of Catholic episcopal conferences have also

accepted responsibility for moral failure during the Holocaust, including the extremely forthright document issued by the French Bishops' Conference in 1997. That is why I find Pope Benedict XVI's statements during his visit to the Cologne synagogue and to the Birkenau death camp rather disconcerting. While the present pope certainly makes clear the horrors of the Nazi period he attributes these to the emergence of neo-paganism in Europe with at best minor Christian complexity. This is simply incorrect history that will not stand up to the facts of the situation. Such denial also compromises the ability of institutional Catholicism to serve as a positive force for moral responsibility in contemporary global society.

Whenever we go on to discuss the more general dimensions of the moral challenge generated by the Holocaust, as we must, we can never lose sight of what happened to concrete living Jews at the time within a society many considered one of most advanced in the Western world. Elie Wiesel's well-known dictum that if we forget the victims we in fact kill them a second time must always remain in the forefront of our consciousness as we make the transition to the broader ethical implications the Holocaust.

Keeping in mind Wiesel's dictum, one of the first challenges arising from an understanding of the context of the Holocaust is that it occurred in a society that was seen as highly developed. It was a society marked by great learning, growing technical capacity and a rich cultural scene. That the Nazi ideology could infiltrate every dimension of such a society and become an integral part of its very fiber in a few short years represents a clear ethical challenge for modernity. Professor Franklin Littell, one of the earliest Christian scholars seriously to engage the experience of the Holocaust, has often referred to the Nazi leadership as technologically trained barbarians. Now that is a

very severe judgment. What Littell was trying to say is that the Nazi leadership had great technical expertise but little in the way of a sense of moral responsibility. The continuing challenge for those of us living in societies whose technical competence has increased a hundredfold over what existed in the Nazi period is how to integrate that enhanced competence with a profound moral sensitivity. Certainly confronting the churches' dark legacy of antisemitism is a necessary first step. We need to engage in a process of spiritual healing, a process of the removal of any remaining seeds of antisemitism through a continuing process of spiritual chemotherapy. And we must be on guard against the reintroduction such seeds in our time in view of the destruction they have generated over the centuries, in particular during the Holocaust. That is why a number of us became so strongly critical of the Mel Gibson film *The Passion of the Christ*. It threatened to reseed Christian education with classical antisemitism, particularly if it were to become, as many of us legitimately feared, a continuing resource for catechetics.⁶ Gibson's personal problems and the revelations about the nature of his unofficial Catholic church fortunately have muted the impact of this film. But regrettably the institutional leadership of the churches failed badly in terms of recognizing the dangers inherent in Gibson's antisemitic presentation of the gospel.

With the above caution in mind, I would now turn to a discussion of some of the more general implications of the Holocaust. Back in the 1970s two futurists introduced us to a fundamental new reality with which religious ethics has yet adequately to confront. Victor Ferkiss, a Catholic political scientist, and Hans Jonas, a social philosopher of Jewish background who escaped the Nazis, served warning that humankind had reached a new threshold in its evolutionary journey. The human community now faced a situation whose potential for destruction equaled its capacity for reaching new levels of creativity

and human dignity. What path humanity would follow was a decision that rested with the next several generations. Neither direct divine intervention nor the arbitrary forces of nature would determine the ultimate outcome. Human choice was now far more critical than ever in the path towards creational survival. So decisions that you and I and ensuing generations make will determine the course of human development and whether in fact there will be authentic human development or whether the human destruction we continue to see around us will continue to grow.

For me Nazism represents an important window into this new reality for our generation and beyond. The Holocaust, as I see it, represents one of the clearest examples in the modern era of the fundamental challenge facing humanity today as described by people such as Ferkiss and Jonas. I view the Holocaust as inaugurating a new era in human self-awareness and human possibility—an era capable of producing unprecedented destruction or unparalleled hope. With the rise of Nazism the mass extermination of human life in a guiltless fashion became thinkable and technologically feasible. The door was now ajar for the dispassionate torture and the murder of millions not merely out of xenophobic fear but as part of a calculated effort to reshape history supported by intellectual argumentation from the best and the brightest minds in human society. It was an attempt as the late Jewish philosopher Emil Fackenheim has argued to wipe out the divine image in history. The murder camp was not an accidental byproduct of the Nazi regime, Fackenheim insisted, but its very essence.⁷ The Nazis really believed that humankind had arrived at a new level of technological possibility and human freedom. In one sense they had a point, however repugnant their response to this new reality. The Nazis had in fact tapped into some of the most important developments in human consciousness. In the Nazi era humanity was beginning to attain a new level of

technological capability which has been enhanced many times over in the ensuing years.

Nazi leadership did not seek out its victims in a totally random way. It had access to a forerunner of the modern computer which allowed for a systemized list of potential victims. Just imagine how much more efficient they could have been if they had owned computers as we have them today. The Nazi era provides us with a foretaste of how enhanced technological capacity can become a potent force for human destruction.

The Nazis also read correctly that a profound change was beginning to enter human consciousness. Humanity now increasingly understood itself as being free of moral mandates, often rooted in the biblical tradition, that had controlled human behavior for centuries. They genuinely believed that the power over all of creation that earlier generations had assigned exclusively to a sovereign God had in fact now come into their hands. In many ways Nazism was the first version of a "death of God" theology. The Nazis no longer feared any punishment by a divine sovereign. They saw their human judgments as ultimate judgments to which there was no basis for appeal. When they arbitrarily decided that certain groups within society were no longer fit to remain part of the human family because they were seen as degrading humanity's dignity, beauty and advancement that constituted an absolutely final decision. No one could question their decisions in such matters nor oppose the practical consequences of such decisions in terms of incarceration and killing. This sense of absolute human power to shape the future of the human community and all of creation represents one of the continuing challenges for the present generation and for future generations of a new sense of human freedom never before contemplated within humanity. Are there any curbs on that freedom? Are there any barometers that subject that freedom to moral constraints? Does God operate in any meaningful way as a moral force in present-day society? These *are*

the profound questions that emerge from the study of Nazism.⁸

The late Uriel Tal captured as well as anyone the basic moral challenge presented by the Holocaust. In his understanding the so-called Final Solution had as its ultimate objective the total transformation of human values. Its stated intent was to "liberate" humanity from all previous moral ideals and codes. When this liberating process had been completed, humanity would be rescued once and for all from all subjection to God-belief and its related notions of moral responsibility, redemption, sin and revelation.⁹ Of we accept this interpretation of the ultimate implications of Nazism, we are confronted with a major challenge. How does the human community properly appropriate the genuine sense of human liberation that was at the core of Nazi ideology and which is the core as well of the Western liberal tradition without surrendering its soul to massive evil. And the new science and technology that was emerging as the Nazis developed their ideology was beginning to provide humankind with a kind of Promethean experience of escape from prior moral chains. People were starting to perceive, however dimly, an enhanced sense of dignity and autonomy that went well beyond what Western Christian theology, what most religious traditions, were prepared to concede.

Numerous writers on the Holocaust have tried to respond to this new reality. One of the more radical responses has come from Jewish philosopher and theologian Irving Greenberg.¹⁰ Greenberg originally went so far as to say that the Holocaust resulted in a total reversal of human and divine responsibility in terms of governance of the world. Greenberg asserted that we must now understand God as the secondary agent in such governance with the human community now assuming the primary role. Greenberg's view was challenged by many both in the Jewish and Christian communities for too radical a reversal of responsibility in terms of the future of humanity and all creation.

Such criticism has led him to modify his viewpoint to some degree in recent years.

While I would agree that Greenberg went too far with regard to role reversal in his initial response I believe his bold new model has forced us to question seriously how we today understand the human and divine relationship in terms of creational governance. Can we continue with the model that predated the Holocaust? I personally do not think so. We cannot escape an enhancement, even a radical one, of human responsibility in the post-Holocaust world. Humanity is now capable of actions that can undermine its future. We can no longer glibly assume that life as we know it will continue unabated if we refrain from taking up our new level of responsibility. What the human community does in the short-term will determine its long-term viability and that of the creation with which it shares this planet. If we fail to address policies that create massive human destruction and threaten our fragile ecological balance then I am convinced we are shunning the primary moral challenge of Nazism. We cannot turn our backs on the unprecedented consciousness of human freedom. But we must find effective ways to channel that sense of human freedom personally and collectively towards greater human dignity rather than use it for the purposes of massive human destruction as was the case with the Nazis.

One important ethical emphasis that has emerged from a number of scholars such as Peter Hayes of Northwestern University, Peter Haas of Case Western Reserve University and Didier Pollefeyt of the Catholic University of Leuven in Belgium is the urgency of restoring a sense of personal responsibility and moral action to the process of human activity in our highly complex societies. Hayes in particular has written extensively on the experience of the German business community during the Holocaust. He shows how the German business community was rather indifferent and even hostile to

Nazi ideology when it first arose. They regarded it as rather bizarre and even somewhat dangerous. But within a few short years they had been fully integrated into its web and they became vital instruments in its implementation. The German business community began to build their plants at death camps in order to secure free, cheap labor. They became part of a process whereby the process of human extermination took on an economic dimension at every turn, including the disposition of corpses. Corpses were seen as having economic value for their *body* parts. And technocrats sat around trying to figure out how to make the death process more economically efficient through improved architectural design of the death camps.

The German business community together with a vast array of Nazi technocrats exhibited a total depersonalization in their active collaboration in the Nazi effort at the total annihilation of European Jewry. The "system" assumed primacy and they were merely cogs in that system. All sense of human responsibility had been sucked out of the system that they maintained. As Peter Hayes puts it, in a few short years the German business community had moved away from the fundamental moral question "what must I not do as a human person" towards a new central question "what else can I do?" All personal moral responsibility had been eroded. The perception became that "all I can do is cooperate with the prevailing system."¹¹

The reality of the Nazi era which Hayes, Haas and Pollefeyt have uncovered continues to have a resonance in contemporary global society. A report from the European Union several years ago revealed that some 250 million children are involved in the current world economic system, often in ways that approach outright slavery. Yet many people connected with this system say "what can I do as an individual" if I wish to remain competitive in that system. So the real moral challenge that surfaced during the

Holocaust remains a crucial issue today: how do we restore a sense that the question "what must I never do" cannot be abandoned if humanity is to regain a moral wholeness? In many ways the present-day economic system is even more complex than it was during the Nazi period. So the task of maintaining personal moral integrity within the system becomes even more challenging.

Another major moral challenge arising from reflection on the Holocaust is that for many people Jews and other Nazi victims became what might be called "unfortunate expendables" in the difficult context of the Nazi era. Jews especially were not seen as falling within the range of society's moral range. When we ask why so many Christians remained indifferent to Nazism even if they did not engage in active collaboration the answer is that Jews were not regarded as part of the universe of obligation by the majority of citizens. It was not that the majority necessarily hated the Jews and other Nazi victims. In fact, some even expressed considerable pity for their plight. But in a situation where expressing any moral concern for the Nazi victims could endanger their own well-being and even self-preservation they tended to respond: "I'm sorry about what is happening to the Jews and the other victims but my own survival takes precedence."

If there is a moral lesson to be taken from the above analysis it would be that we need to redefine our identities individually and as members of a religious community in a way that includes the outsider within our universe of moral obligation. As a Christian ethicist I have insisted on the centrality of human rights for authentic Christian identity, for responsible ecclesial identity. As we examine the history of Christian leadership during the Nazi era we see a tendency for many in leadership to argue that their fundamental responsibility must be the preservation of their respective religious institution. While supporting human rights was a legitimate goal in their eyes it had to

take a backseat to institutional preservation. My question remains, does such a hierarchy of values not in the end sow the seeds of institutional destruction? The German Protestant pastor Martin Niemoeller is famous for his statement that when the Nazis first came for trade unionists, Jews, and other of their victims he did not protest because he was not part of the circles of these people. And when the Nazis finally came for him there was no one left to protest. The point he was making, and it remains a vital point today, is that when the human rights of any group in a society are threatened the entire society is in fact threatened.

Hence one of the most important conclusions for contemporary ethics to emerge from a study of the Holocaust is the need to recognize the ultimate connection and even integration among people, even those who might be legitimately regarded as enemies. I have examined documents from the Nazi extermination camps which report on daily activities at those camps. If I were to present you with a typical copy of such reports and did not identify the source you might well conclude that it described the daily output at a manufacturing plant. These reports were totally devoid of any human language, of any indication that what they were recording was the daily destruction of human beings. Such "neutralization" of language can make destruction of people much more palpable to the human conscience. Professor Henry Friedlander, a well-known scholar on the Holocaust, wrote an essay reflecting on the Vietnam War and the Holocaust in which he compared the language the United States military used in reporting on the deaths of Vietnamese during that war with these reports from the Nazi extermination camps.¹² In both the human dimension was totally absent. And in the current war in Iraq there are virtually no reports on the deaths among the local civilian population. Clearly a legacy of the Nazi era is the neutralization of language regarding casualties in time of war that religious ethics

must consistently combat.

These then are some of the major ethical challenges that continue to present themselves out of an analysis of the Nazi era. The Holocaust has revealed to us the pernicious nature of antisemitism and why we must always be vigilant about allowing any replanting of its seeds as was the case with the Mel Gibson film. The process of spiritual chemotherapy must continue unabated. But we need as well to confront the broader ethical issues in light of the new post-Holocaust realization that the destiny of humanity, in fact of all creation, now lies in human hands in a manner and to a degree never imaginable in previous generations. The fundamental question raised by Peter Hayes and others, "do I as a human individual maintain a high degree of morality in a very complex social setting or do I glibly say that I am only one person and have no choice but to go along with what 'the system' seems to demand?" remains as real as ever.

In terms of the question just posed the example of the "righteous" or "rescuers" during the Holocaust provides us with some encouragement. While I have always been careful not to exploit their profound witness to cover over the much wider example of collaboration and bystanding within the community they do serve us well with regard to moral courage within a system of human destruction. I vividly recall a ceremony in which I participated as part of a U.S. Presidential delegation in the Ukraine marking the 50th anniversary of the slaughter at Babi Yar. We were in a large theater in Kiev. On one side of the stage before us there was a group of rescuers, mostly elderly women of peasant stock, and on the other side people who had been rescued, though not necessarily by the exact people who shared the stage with them. The rescuers had a somewhat terrified look on their faces as they appeared in front of a large international audience in the theater itself and via a trans-European telecast. Somehow these rescuers had found

within themselves the inner strength to stand apart from "the system" that prevailed during the Nazi era. For me such a witness in the Ukraine as well as in Poland, Denmark and other countries together with more recent example such as that of Rosa Parks on a bus in Alabama provide me with a measure of hope that it is possible to stand apart from the dominant system, even in times of social crisis. Put we need to recognize that such witness frequently comes with a price, even the sacrifice of one's life.

The moral challenge the Holocaust continues to lay before us is far from easy. It is not something that merely happened over a half century ago. It opened the doors to a very modern process that continues to present the need for profound moral courage. The question for us is whether you and I have the inner strength to face up to its ongoing challenges.

END NOTES

¹ Henry Friedlander and the late Sybil Milton have championed this bioracial interpretation of the Holocaust. Cf. Henry Friedlander, *The Origins of Nazi Genocide: From Euthanasia to the Final Solution* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1995); Sybil Milton, "The Context of the Holocaust," *German Studies Review* 13 (May 1990), 267-273.

² For a further discussion of Pope Benedict XVI on the Holocaust, cf. John T. Pawlikowski, "Pope Benedict XVI and Catholic-Jewish Relations: What Has He Said? What Might He Say and Do?" in *Nostra Aetate at 40: Achievements and Challenges in Christian-Jewish Relations*, ed. Jean Duhaime (Ottawa: Novalis, 2007), 77-91.

³ Gerhard Kittel, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1977).

⁴ The best introduction to Christian antisemitism is still Edward Flannery's *The Anguish of the Jews*. Cf. the revised and update edition with an Introduction by Philip A. Cunningham (New York/Mahwah, NJ: Paulist. A Stimulus Book, 2004).

⁵ For the texts of *We Remember* and various other Catholic episcopal statements on the Holocaust, cf. Secretariat for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs, National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Catholics Remember the Holocaust* (Washington: United States Catholic Conference, 1998). For a critical discussion of *We Remember*, cf. *Ethics in the Shadow of the Holocaust: Christian and Jewish Perspectives*, eds. Judith H. Banki and John T. Pawlikowski, OSM (Franklin, WI and Chicago: Sheed & Ward, 2001).

⁶ For a discussion of the Gibson film, cf. *Pondering the Passion: What's At Stake for Christians and Jews*, ed. Philip A. Cunningham (Lanham/Boulder/ New York: Roman & Littlefield. A Sheed & Ward book. 2004); and *Perspectives on The Passion of the Christ. Religious Thinkers and Writers Explore the Issues Raised By the Controversial Movie*, ed. Jonathan Burnham. (New York: Miramax, 2004).

⁷) Emil Fackenheim, *The Jewish Return Into History* (New York: Schocken, 1978), 246.

⁸ Cf. *Good and Evil After The Holocaust: Ethical Implications for Today*, eds. Jack Bemporad, John T. Pawlikowski and Joseph Sievers (Hoboken, NJ: KTAV, 2000).

⁹ Uriel Tal, *Christians and Jews in Germany: Religion, Politics and Ideology in the Second Reich, 1870-1914* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1975); and "Forms of Pseudo-Religion in the German *Kulturbemich* Prior to the Holocaust," *Immanuel* 3 (1973-1974), 69.

¹⁰ Irving Greenberg, "The Voluntary Covenant," *Perspectives* 3.(New York: National Jewish Resource Center, 1982).

¹¹ Peter Hayes, *Industry and Ideology: I. G. Farben in the Nazi Era* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988); "Profits and Persecution: German Big Business and the Holocaust." (Washington: Center for Advanced Holocaust Research, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 1998; "Conscience, Knowledge, and 'Secondary Ethics',"

in i, OSM, *Ethics in the Shadow of the Holocaust*, edited by Judith H. Banki and John T. Pawlikowski, 313-335.

¹² Henry Friedlander, "The Manipulation of Language," in *The Holocaust: Ideology, Bureaucracy, and Genocide* edited by Henry Friedlander and Sybil Milton (Millwood, NY: Kraus International Publications, 1980), 103-113.